# Chapter 2
# Beginnings Without Ends

If politics is essentially about 'ends and means', then this implies that political actors must always have a clear end in sight (Dewey 1973). But is this necessarily the case? Recent occupy movements such as Occupy Wall Street (OWS), the Spanish 15-M movement and Nuit Debout were met with great scepticism. What, it was asked, were these movements actually for (Frank 2013)? Why did they often refuse to present an implementable agenda or strategy (Mirowski 2013: 327)? However, many of these occupy movements explicitly rejected such an instrumentalist logic.

How, then, should the relation between the employed means and the pursued ends of radical politics be understood from a prefigurative perspective? This relation has been conceptualised in a number of ways. In the following sections, I discuss three of these conceptualisations and critically assess them in the context of contemporary protest movements. First, in anarchist theory the principle of 'prefiguration' is often taken to prescribe a high measure of consistency between the applied means and the ultimate ends of revolutionary politics (Franks 2003: 16). But this implies that participants always act with a clear end in sight, which often is not the case. Alternatively, prefiguration could be conceived of as a 'rehearsal', the ends of which are open to continuous reformulation. Prefiguration then is viewed as an experimental attempt to act 'as if' the desired change is already in place – for instance, in order to gain a better understanding of the exact change that one wants to see in the future. However, by interpreting prefiguration as a rehearsal of future ends, one risks downplaying the immediate experience that it entails for those involved. Another possibility, which is more open to this experiential character, would be to argue that prefiguration caters to a plurality of (individually held) ends, rather than a single,

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common end. The problem with this interpretation, however, is that it tends to overlook the political and collective character of prefigurative democracy. I therefore propose a fourth option: rather than redefine the relation between means and ends, prefigurative democracy may be understood to refute this category altogether. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's understanding of political action, I argue that prefigurative politics should be conceived as a beginning *without* ends. Such an open-ended conceptualisation of prefigurative democracy sheds a different light on the practices of contemporary social movements.

## Beyond Consistency: Rethinking the Relation Between Means and Ends

The idea of prefiguration is often associated with an attempt to live or act consistently with one's ideal image of what a future society should look like. Take, for instance, this fragment by the anarchist scholar and activist Cindy Milstein:

> We're not putting off the good society until some distant future but attempting to carve out room for it in the here and now, however tentative and contorted under the given social order. In turn, this consistency of means and ends implies an ethical approach to politics. How we act now is how we want others to begin to act, too. We try to model a notion of goodness even as we fight for it. (Milstein 2010: 111)

As this fragment suggests, prefiguration is often understood as an 'ethical' way to pursue radical change (Breines 1989). The idea is that one must aspire to 'be' or embody the desired change within one's own movement or private life. Alongside such ethical considerations, however, one may also pursue consistency between means and ends simply because it is necessary. As Audre Lorde (1984: 123) famously put it: 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'. As we have all been conditioned in a society based on various forms of oppression and marginalisation, it follows that we have internalised many habits and ideas that are harmful to ourselves and others. Effective radical change thus not only requires the prefiguration of alternative social structures and living conditions, but is also a matter of changing oneself. For example, one may think of upholding non-violence as a guiding principle. Pacifist anarchists have always dismissed the use of revolutionary violence,

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as this would be inconsistent with the end of establishing a peaceful society devoid of conflict and domination (Thaler 2019). As the Dutch anarcho-syndicalist Bart de Ligt (1883–1938) asserted, there 'appears a flagrant contradiction between such means and the goal in sight' (1989: 72). Seen from this perspective, then, an essential part of a prefigurative politics may be to enact a non-violent movement culture 'that works within and acts against a dominant society by upholding criticism, dialogue, and nonviolent actions' (Vinthagen 2015: 287).

However, this focus on consistency also gives rise to a number of practical and theoretical problems. To begin with, one inevitably operates in an environment that is hostile to one's own ideas and principles (Wilson 2014: 175). This arguably means that one often cannot be fully consistent. Discussions on the use of violence may well serve to illustrate this. Even though most practitioners of a prefigurative politics would probably agree that the ideal aim is to establish a peaceful society, this unfortunately does not mean that non-violence can always be consistently observed in practice – for instance, because one needs to defend oneself against violent opponents or a repressive state (Crow 2011; Gelderloos 2007). An obvious example would be the occupation of Tahrir Square during the Egyptian revolution of 2011. Surely, the activist tent camp that emerged on this iconic square had significant prefigurative features (De Smet 2016; Van de Sande 2013), but it was also under siege by Mubarak's supporters and state security forces. Whilst the idealised image of a 'utopian republic of Tahrir' (Khalil 2011: 247) has often been reproduced in the media, it tends to be forgotten that many Egyptian revolutionaries lost their lives defending the square (Abul-Magd 2012). One may of course aspire to be consistent, even when it comes to the deployment of self-defence. But when push comes to shove, under these circumstances it arguably is impossible to act consistently with the ideal society that one seeks to establish in the long term.

Another problem with consistency as a key criterion for prefigurative politics is that one may not always have a clear idea of the pursued ends. As Dan Swain argues, '[i]f one is to match means to ends, one needs fairly substantive agreement on ends'. But this suggests 'that the ends are in fact in view, that is, specified to a greater or lesser degree' (Swain 2019: 53). As we have seen, however, it is far from evident what the end of a prefigurative politics should entail. There obviously are practical limitations to our ability to

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imagine a perfect society (after all, our imagination is fallible), but also more principled ones. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the ends and foundations of a democratic politics can never be taken for granted, and must always be open to scrutiny, contestation and rearticulation. As Claude Lefort argues, democracy 'is instituted and sustained by the dissolution of the markers of certainty' (1988c: 19). It may thus make more sense to understand prefiguration as a radically open-ended practice (Gordon 2008: 40–6) that challenges the 'established institution of society' (Castoriadis 1993: 263) and seeks to politically reconstitute it – without knowing in advance where or when (if ever) it should come to a close.

This gives rise to the question how exactly are the means and ends of prefigurative democracy related, in a time when the 'markers of certainty' have indeed disappeared and the ultimate ends of politics are often unclear? In the following sections, I briefly engage with a number of possible solutions to this problem: prefiguration as a rehearsal or acting 'as if' the desired social conditions are already in place; prefiguration as an ethics that serves a plurality of different (and often individually held) ends; and finally, prefiguration as a radically open-ended politics.

## Acting 'As If': Prefiguration as a Rehearsal

How can the means and ends of a prefigurative politics be related, if there is no certainty about the ends that must be pursued in the first place? One possible solution to this problem is that the ends of a prefigurative politics must be continuously rearticulated throughout the process itself. Prefigurative politics should then be understood as the temporary, and inevitably imperfect, realisation of a hypothetical end. One deliberately acts *as if* the conditions for establishing a radically different society are already in place.

Such a conception is proposed by Brecht De Smet and Dan Swain, who employ the pedagogical theories of the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky and his conception of 'proleptic learning' in order to better appreciate the open-endedness of prefigurative politics. According to Vygotsky, a pedagogical process can only be effective when it foreshadows or anticipates future attainments in the process itself. In De Smet's formulation (2015: 52), proleptic learning thus 'anticipates or imagines competence through the representation of a future act or development as already existing'. By pretending to have already acquired a certain level or skill, one projects oneself

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at a more advanced stage – and thus gradually obtains said level or skill in practice. Swain (2019: 58) associates this idea of 'proleptic learning' with a rehearsal. One repeatedly enacts the pursued ends in practice, thus gradually working towards a better performance. Acting 'as if' the desired change can already be put into practice thus serves a certain didactic function. But, Davina Cooper adds, it also grants a certain legitimacy to one's actions. In a prefigurative politics, 'action is set so that a social, scientific, ethical and political "otherwise" justifies, validates, normalises and holds up the actions undertaken' (Cooper 2020: 896–7).

This 'proleptic' reading of prefiguration has a number of advantages. First, it allows us to understand prefiguration as a distinctively experimental process (Raekstad and Gradin 2020: 37; Swain 2019: 56), in which the stated end is a hypothesis as to what a radically different form of society might look like. That is to say that the concrete ends of prefigurative practices must be subject to continuous revision and reformulation throughout, and after, the process. It also follows that any attempt to prefigure radical change will inevitably be imperfect and fall short of its ultimate objectives. As a consequence, and unlike some anarchist conceptions of prefiguration, proleptic learning is not primarily aimed at moral consistency: there inevitably 'remains a difference between the attempt at enactment and its successful realisation' (Swain 2019: 58). The point, in other words, is not to 'get it right' the first time, but continuous practice may lead to a more refined understanding both of the ends that are to be pursued, and the way to realise them in practice. Samuel Beckett's famous phrase – 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better' – may well apply to this particular reading of prefiguration (Thaler 2019: 1012).

Although experimentation is indeed a particularly relevant feature of prefigurative politics (Van de Sande 2013: 230; 2015: 189), this idea of prefiguration as a form of 'proleptic learning' or 'rehearsing' has a number of shortcomings. As any musician or actor is well aware, rehearsing not only entails the continuous repetition and refinement of one's performance. In most cases, one also has to follow (or even memorise) a script or sheet music. The outcomes of each attempt may vary to some degree, and the point of the exercise may not necessarily be to 'get it right' the first time. But there usually *is* a rather specific idea of what the eventual performance or recording of a piece should look or sound like. Thus, it is still implied that a future end must be 'already in place' (Cooper 2020: 908),

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in the sense that some shared agreement on its intended form and content is already presupposed. It is questionable, however, to what extent this applies to recent prefigurative movements, such as OWS or 15-M. Not only were they politically diverse, but they also often lacked a shared understanding of what their protest should lead to. This question was continuously at stake in their prefigurative experiments.

Another problem with this conception of prefiguration is that it remains oblivious to its more immediate *experiential* value. Prefigurative experimentation may not only lead to a better or more refined understanding of one's ends, but it also has a strongly emancipatory or empowering character in the here and now. The wish to live a better or more fulfilling life in the present has always been an important motivation to engage with prefigurative politics. Imperfect and short-lived as these experiences may be, Lynne Segal (2017: 206) stresses, what truly matters 'is primarily the consciousness acquired through the exhilarating joy of resistance itself, the sense of shared agency expressed in helping to build any alternative, autonomous space, for as long as they might last'. Although the value of experience is acknowledged in comparisons between prefiguration and proleptic learning (De Smet 2020: 12; Swain 2019: 52), it is still mostly appreciated in light of its distant end. This also implies that there must be a qualitative difference between this ultimate end and its prefigurations in the present. However, prefiguration may also be experienced as something that has intrinsic value or meaning to those engaged in it – no matter what its eventual outcome may be. Seen from this perspective, a prefigurative experience might in no way be inferior to its projected future. As well as its experimental character, then, a theory of prefigurative democracy should also account for this more immediate, experiential meaning. To stick with the music analogy: rather than the rehearsal of a classical orchestra, perhaps prefiguration could be imagined as an open-ended jam session (by amateur musicians). Its success is not based on the ability to execute a pre-set script or score; improvisation is key, and although one may of course aspire to develop one's musical skills through practice, it does not serve a predefined end external to itself.

## A Plurality of *Teloi*: Prefiguration as Virtue Ethics

Another possible way to reimagine the relation between means and ends in a prefigurative politics is to argue that it caters to a wide

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variety of different ends or interests. Such a conception of prefiguration is promoted by contemporary post-anarchist theorists. Although the term is used in various ways (Franks 2007), what 'post-anarchists' such as Saul Newman, Andrew Koch and Todd May have in common is the aspiration to combine key aspects of anarchist political thought with elements of post-structuralist philosophy. They thus tend to take the term 'anarchism' rather literally: ἀναρχία should not merely be translated as the absence (ἀν-) of a leader or government or ἀρχός – but, more fundamentally, as the complete lack of any first principle or ἀρχή (Newman 2001: 161; see also Bey 2003; Schürmann 1987: 6). In short, post-anarchists not only pursue the classical anarchist ideal of a stateless and classless society, but reject the idea that society could be based on a moral or ontological foundation (such as 'universal truth', 'the good' or 'human nature'). Post-anarchists also typically refute any attempt to provide a political or symbolic representation of 'society' (Jun 2012: 105; Koch 1993; May 1994: 47–8). In this respect, post-anarchists significantly deviate from their 'classical' forebears such as Bakunin and Kropotkin:

> We can no longer sustain the idea, present in classical anarchism, of the uprising of an already constituted rational and ethical body against the external encumbrance of power. . . . [T]his social totality no longer exists, which is why contemporary insurrections need to invent new forms of solidarity and being-in-common. (Newman 2016: 65)

It thus follows that post-anarchists reject the idea of a shared social, moral or political *telos*. They instead advocate an ethical framework that allows us to appreciate an endless plurality of meanings, principles, goals and aspirations that we have as singularities (Koch 1993: 346). Seen from this post-anarchist perspective, then, prefiguration implies 'a refusal of strategic politics' as it eschews any long-term ends and instead 'takes place in the immediacy of the present, in the here and now, without being determined by a particular future end or *telos*' (Newman 2016: 65). It is exactly this aspiration, Newman holds, that renders it a distinctively ethical outlook on radical political practice (Newman 2016: 64).

But what would a post-anarchist ethics look like in practice, and how may it relate to other (normatively and ontologically founded) moral theories? Benjamin Franks, an anarchist philosopher and critical fellow traveller of the post-anarchist tendency, has dealt most

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extensively with this question. As established in the previous chapter, Franks initially counterpoised prefiguration to consequentialist theories of revolutionary politics (2003: 23–4; 2006: 102–3). But if prefiguration is not compatible with a consequentialist view of radical politics (as some of the early anarchists and syndicalists thought), then how exactly must the relation between its means and ends be understood? One option may be to turn to that other prominent school of normative ethics: deontology. Unlike consequentialism, deontology assesses the morality of an action on the basis of the rules or duties to which it should adhere. Moreover, Immanuel Kant's famous imperative that other human beings should never be treated merely as a means to an end corresponds well with the anarchist intuition that one should always seek to act in accordance with one's ends (Franks 2006: 108). The problem with this deontological framework, however, is that it still presupposes at least some ontologically founded and universalist conception of 'the good' or 'the just'. This is something that Franks, like many contemporary (post-)anarchists, eschews, as 'it would foreshorten the possibilities for moral subjects to determine their own ends' (2008: 141).

Franks's solution is to associate prefiguration with a third important school of normative ethics. The 'prefigurative characteristic of creating and maintaining fulfilling social practices that are co-operative, non-hierarchical and generate or perpetuate similar activity,' he argues, 'makes practical anarchism particularly congruent with virtue ethics' (Franks 2010: 141). There are a number of reasons why a virtue ethics seems to cater well to a prefigurative politics. First, virtues are typically exercised 'without regard to consequences' (MacIntyre 1985: 198). A course of action is not prescribed by its perceivable outcomes, but rather appeals to a concept of virtuous conduct. In the context of prefigurative practices, this means that one is not primarily focused on the free or just society that a revolutionary politics should ultimately bring about – but rather on the forms of solidarity and social cooperation that can already be realised in the present (Franks 2010: 146).

Another advantage of virtue ethics is that it allows activists to come to grips with the difficulties of pursuing moral and political consistency within a social context that is incompatible with, or even hostile to, their own political ideals. Rather than a claim to full consistency between means and ends, prefiguration then may also be read as a way to 'foster both a sense of responsibility' and an attempt 'to begin working through ways of responding to ethical

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conflicts' (Wilson 2014: 195). One may argue that the ground for its legitimacy lies neither in the ability to give a detailed account of its ends, nor in the capacity to consistently act in accordance with these ends, but precisely in the mutual correspondence between these means and ends (Jun 2012: 238–9). Such legitimation thus can only be given in light of the concrete context in which one acts.

But most importantly, adherence to one virtue does not necessarily imply the dismissal of others. Different virtues can be pursued alongside each other. Franks asserts that virtue ethics also does not necessarily presuppose a universalist concept of human nature or of the good life – or, for that matter, of what constitutes a sound political strategy (Franks 2010: 150–1). Instead, virtues refer to goods that 'are inherent in social practices, [and] have their own rules, which are negotiable and alter over time' (Franks 2008: 147). This also means that, unlike a deontological or consequential ethics, Franks's prefigurative virtue ethics does not necessarily require a single, fixed *telos* or end – nor does it presuppose that one *telos* is prioritised or hierarchised over others. Instead, a prefigurative ethics should cater to the various goals or *teloi* that different actors or collectives may have, even within the context of a single social movement. This is where Franks parts ways with his post-anarchist interlocutors: whereas '[r]ejecting a single universal (*telos*) is . . . epistemologically, ethically, and ontologically consistent with anarchism', he also asserts that 'rejecting all goals would undermine valuable social practices and make anti-hierarchical prefiguration impossible' (Franks 2018: 40).

How, then, may this anti-instrumentalist idea of prefiguration as a virtue ethics be employed in the context of recent occupation movements such as OWS or the Spanish 15-M movement? One advantage of Franks's proposal is that it allows us to appreciate the radical open-endedness of these movements. As we have seen before, these movements were typically pluralistic and their individual participants often had very different reasons or motivations to join them (Juris 2012; Kotsev 2013; Mensahawy 2020: 130). Imagining prefiguration as informed by a plurality of *teloi* or motivations allows us to understand how the concrete articulation of its ends is always immediately at stake in a prefigurative politics. It also entails a better appreciation as to why prefiguration is so meaningful for those who take part in it.

At the same time, it is questionable whether this idea of prefiguration as virtue ethics is specific enough to understand what

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is at stake in a radical-democratic politics. Most liberals would readily agree that one's acts should 'encapsulate the values desired in their preferred goals' (Franks 2008: 137; 2010: 114). Perhaps, Luke Yates (2015: 18) argues, 'as a qualifier of prefiguration the "means–ends equivalence" idea is simply not precise enough'. Moreover, recent prefigurative movements often sought to make a *collective* intervention by experimentally shaping a new institutional form of society. They articulated new, shared political discourses and sought to establish systemic change in the long run. Surely, a prefigurative social movement pertains to more than a sum of individuals, who each pursue their own ends. This post-anarchist idea of prefiguration as informed by a plurality of *teloi* may end up downplaying its distinctive political or collective characteristics – or, at least, for it to be employed in the context of recent social movements.

In the previous pages I have reconstructed three different conceptualisations of the relation between means and ends in a prefigurative politics. According to its classical definition, the means of prefigurative action are deemed to be fully consistent with its ends. But this implies that it is always possible to act consistently and that one has a positive (and rather detailed) understanding of the ends that one seeks to realise. An alternative option would be to see prefiguration as a 'rehearsal', but this still fails to grasp both its open-endedness and its experiential character. Finally, the post-anarchist idea of prefiguration may cater to a variety of (individually held) *teloi*, but this arguably obscures the political and collective character of prefigurative democracy. We thus need a fourth way to conceive of this relation between the means and ends of prefigurative democracy. This should allow us to integrate several features of the various conceptions discussed above. First, prefigurative democracy is a radically open-ended and experimental process, meaning that it is not necessarily informed by a predefined idea of its intended outcomes. Second, it has a typically non-instrumentalist and experiential character in the sense that it entails a concrete and inherently meaningful experience on the part of its practitioners. And third, prefiguration must be understood as a distinctively political practice, in the sense that one pursues radical change at a collective (and not merely an individual) level. As I show in the remainder of this chapter, the political thought of Hannah Arendt may well inform such a notion of prefigurative democracy.

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## Hannah Arendt's Conception of Political Action

One distinctive feature that Arendt's philosophical conception of political action has in common with the originally anarchist idea of prefiguration is that both originated in a critique of Marxism. Upon finishing her famous *Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951, Arendt embarked on a research project with the aim of showing how certain aspects in Karl Marx's political thought would eventually be instrumental to the emergence of totalitarianism (Weisman 2014; Young-Bruehl 2004: 278–9). This project would never be completed, but among the various philosophical works that indirectly sprang from it was her opus magnum *The Human Condition*. Arendt's aim in this book was 'to think what we are doing. . . . It deals only with the most elementary articulations of the human condition, with those activities that traditionally, as well as according to current opinion, are within the range of every human being' (Arendt 1958: 5). In order to establish this, Arendt employs her trusted methodology of the conceptual distinction (Arendt 2018b: 473–4). 'What we are doing', then, is classified into three distinct categories: that of 'labour', 'work' and 'action'.

It is often held that this categorisation corresponds with another of Arendt's famous distinctions: that between a private and a public sphere. The private sphere, which is confined within the walls of the household, and is characterised by the hardships of everyday life, typically is the realm of labour. It revolves around the maintenance of biological life or *zōē*. This is counterpoised to the public sphere, which is where our public life, or *bios*, takes place. The public sphere is shared with, or constituted between, others. And so one's political actions and interventions are witnessed and judged by these others (1958: 97). It is often claimed that such a rigid division between the private sphere of labour and the public sphere of political engagement has rather problematic gendered implications (Butler 2015: 86–8). But without intending to downplay the oblivion to gendered or racial inequality that is manifested throughout Arendt's oeuvre (and in this distinction between the private and the public realm in particular), I assert that another reading of her classification between work, labour and action is possible. Arendt can help us to better appreciate what renders political engagement worthwhile and meaningful – for instance, in the context of contemporary social movements. However, this implies that we do not understand

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'labour', 'work' and 'action' as distinct categories, each with their own corresponding realm or 'territory', but instead approach them as 'the fraught conjunction of two different pairs of concepts – labor and work, and work and action' (Markell 2011: 18).

We can be relatively brief about the first of these pairs, as it is arguably one of Arendt's best-known arguments. What distinguishes labour on the one hand from action and work on the other, she argues, is that the former is characterised by necessity – and, in consequence, its inherent repetitiveness and endlessness. Only labour is 'unending, progressing automatically in accordance with life itself and outside the range of wilful decisions or humanly meaningful purposes' (Arendt 1958: 105–6). We daily perform labour in order to sustain our biological life. The products of labour are typically meant for consumption, meaning that they 'appear and disappear' continuously (Arendt 1958: 94). Work, on the other hand, is the kind of activity that results in objects with 'worldly permanence' (Arendt 1958: 143). By producing durable artefacts, we furnish the world around us and thus grant to our temporary presence here some measure of stability and durability. In this way, work transgresses the realm of mere necessity. The same could be said of political action: although it does not lead to durable products or results, as we will see below, action is equally characterised by an absence of necessity (Arendt 2005a: 119). It is often assumed that Arendt frowns upon labour. But a more accurate reading may be that labour consists of the 'repetitive, mundane activities that sustain a trust in life' (Gündoğdu 2015: 138), and thus realises the elementary preconditions for both work and public engagement. Labour may not always be the most fulfilling or inherently meaningful activity, but it has its own proper place and function in the reproductive cycle of life.

A second feature that Arendt ascribes to political action can be found when we counterpose labour and action on the one hand to work on the other. Work, or the activity of making something, is fundamentally characterised by the relation between means and ends (1958: 143). It not only requires a particular plan, model or blueprint – a detailed idea of the artefact or object in which the work process eventually is supposed to result – but also the use of means (tools and instruments) to obtain these ends. Work is the activity that mediates between tools, raw materials and the products into which they eventually are reshaped. It is a distinctively instrumentalist category: in work, 'the end justifies the means; it does more,

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it produces and organizes them' (Arendt 1958: 153). This has several consequences for our understanding of work vis-à-vis labour. Labour is 'caught in the cyclical movement of the body's life process', and thus 'has neither a beginning nor an end' (Arendt 1958: 144). Work, on the other hand, is distinct from all other human activities precisely in that it has 'a definite, predictable end and a definite, predictable beginning' (Arendt 1958: 143). Writing in English, Arendt deliberately exploits the double meaning of the word 'end' in this context (Arendt 2018d: 299). First of all, the 'end' is what results from a production process: the thing or object that such a process is intended to bring forth. But at the same time, the 'end' of a production process is also the projected moment when this process comes to a close. Any work will eventually be finished. Of course, one can start anew and aim to re-establish the same end. But the next production process (and, thus, its point of conclusion) will always differ from the former – as much as its product will be a different product. No two 'ends' of work are exactly the same.

Action, then, resembles the labour process in this last respect. Both typically lack an 'end' in this double sense of the word – albeit for different reasons. Labour, on the one hand, is endless due to its inherently repetitive or circular process. Action, on the other hand, is endless because its outcomes simply cannot be foreseen (Arendt 1958: 233). Arendt presents two related arguments in support for this statement. First, as we have seen, one always acts in a world that is shared with many others, who each have their own motivations and intentions. Any action can set into motion a 'new chain of happenings' (Arendt 2006b: 59–60). Due to this 'infinitude of intersecting and interfering intentions and purposes' (Arendt 1968a: 147), it is often impossible to grasp the aims and motives of individual actors. What is more, such motives tend to remain ambiguous or unclear to these actors themselves (Arendt 2006a: 88). Not only are those who engage in political action uncertain about the outcomes of their own deeds, but they often 'know not what they do', or why they do it (Arendt 1968a: 148). It is only afterwards, with the benefit of hindsight, that one may be able to ascribe a particular 'end' to one's actions and political engagements in order to make sense of it. This also means that an action can never be judged on the basis of its intended outcomes. 'Every good action for the sake of a bad end,' Arendt claims, 'actually adds to the world a portion of goodness, and every bad action for the sake of a good end actually adds to the world a portion of badness' (Arendt 1968a: 148).

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In short, a political deed cannot be assessed on the basis of its 'ends' since the intentions behind it often remain unclear – not least to the actors themselves – and because its concrete outcomes are always unforeseeable.

Why is Arendt so invested in this conceptual distinction between action and work? She asserts that in modern political thought and philosophy, the two have often been confused. As *Homo faber* has come to determine our entire relation with the world around us, political action is often mistaken for a fabrication process (Arendt 1958: 305–6). This instrumentalist tendency in the philosophical tradition culminates in the work of Marx – who, Arendt holds, conceived of '"making the future" and "building and improving society" as though one were talking about making chairs and building and improving houses' (Arendt 2005b: 58). This is not only problematic at a conceptual level, but it has also had disastrous consequences. In fact, this instrumentalist aspect in the tradition of Western political thought was arguably one of the elements that would eventually give rise to totalitarianism. When our understanding of action collapses with that of making – a realm in which 'everything is judged in terms of suitability and usefulness for the desired end, and for nothing else' (Arendt 1958: 153) – it follows that the ends justify any means. It moreover implies that those who engage in political action merely serve as the instruments of political change or historical progress: that one 'cannot make an omelette without breaking any eggs' (Arendt 1994b: 283–4). Those who appeal to this rationale, Arendt argues, tend to confuse political action with violence – a realm that 'is ruled by the means–end category, [and] whose chief characteristic, if applied to human affairs, has always been that the end is in danger of being overwhelmed by the means which it justifies and which are needed to reach it' (Arendt 1972a: 106). Nothing, Arendt holds, could be further removed from what makes political action and public engagement truly meaningful to those involved in it.

Let me pause for a moment, and briefly summarise what can be concluded from our reading of Arendt so far. I have established two (or two pairs of) conceptual distinctions that Arendt develops in *The Human Condition* and other works from the late 1950s and early 1960s. First, as opposed to labour, political action presupposes that one is free from necessity. Second, as opposed to work, action is essentially open-ended and cannot be assessed by instrumentalist standards (Meade 1997: 119). But if political engagement

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is not primarily aimed at the relief of necessity or the pursuit of specific predefined ends, then what *is* at stake in politics? Why, in other words, would one engage in political action at all? Before we can apply our findings in the context of prefigurative protest movements, I will first turn to another part of Arendt's oeuvre in order to address these questions.

## Freedom: Arendt on the Meaning of Politics

In addition to her planned book on Marx, in the late 1950s Arendt also embarked on a second project. Her plan was to write an 'Introduction into Politics' that should provide a 'more systematic examination of those spheres of the world and human life which we properly call political, that is, of the public realm on the one hand, and of action an [*sic*] the other' (Arendt 1993: 201). The unfinished manuscript, which is originally written in German and was published posthumously, comprises several unsuccessful attempts to commence the project over the course of years. Eventually, Arendt decides to employ a more experiential or phenomenological approach. Rather than reconstructing the conceptual meaning of 'political action', she asks: what does politics mean to those who take part in it? What is the purpose of politics for them? And is it still possible to meaningfully engage with politics at all? (2005a: 96–108).

This phenomenological approach allows Arendt to immediately answer her own question. 'The answer is: the meaning of politics is freedom. Its simplicity and conclusive force lie . . . in the existence of politics as such' (Arendt 2005a: 108). Freedom, she states further on in manuscript, 'most certainly was and is not the end purpose of politics, that is, something that can be achieved by political means. It is rather the substance and meaning of all things political' (Arendt 2005a: 129). Again, Arendt deliberately exploits the various uses and meanings of a term – this time of 'meaning' (*Sinn*) itself. The meaning of something is always intrinsic in the thing itself. Unlike ends, which only emerge once an activity has come to its point of conclusion, meaning only properly exists in the moment of action (Arendt 2005a: 194). Thus, freedom is the 'meaning of politics' in the double sense that it is both its purpose or raison d'être – the very reason why we engage in politics in the first place – and that it best describes this 'field of experience' for those engaged in it (2006f: 145). As Arendt states in her famous essay on freedom, people 'are free . . . as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to *be* free

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and to act are the same' (2006f: 141). This experiential intepretation of political action evidently corresponds with Arendt's critique of instrumentalism. Freedom, as the meaning of politics, is not an end product that results from a political fabrication process (Topolski 2015: 65; Vergara 2020: 191). Quite the opposite: it is precisely due to this lack of blueprints, models and rigid procedures and protocols that one finally is free to act in a political context. In politics, the question what it is we are doing, and why we do it, is always on the table. And it is precisely this radical open-endedness and the lack of necessity – in short: the fact that we do not know what we do – that renders political action free (Bowen-Moore 1989: 59).

Bringing together these two aspects in Arendt's political thought – her conceptual distinction between 'labour', 'work' and 'action' on the one hand, and her experiential reading of freedom as the meaning of politics on the other – allows us to rethink the relation between the means and ends of prefigurative democracy. In fact, employing Arendt in this context gives rise to the question whether this category of means and ends can be employed in this context at all. If labour 'has neither a beginning nor an end' (Arendt 1958: 144) and work typically has 'a definite, predictable end and a definite, predictable beginning' (Arendt 1958: 143), then political action may as well be construed as a beginning *without* ends. One initiates something new, without knowing where this will lead in the long term. This also implies that it entails a certain risk or insecurity (Lorey 2015: 79). Arendt consistently relates the human potentiality for making new beginnings to the condition of natality. This is not merely a metaphor: it is not *like* the way we are born, but precisely *because* we were once born into a world shared with others, that we all have an innate capacity to make an intervention, begin something new – and, thus, be free (Arendt 1996: 55; Bowen-Moore 1989: 26). 'Because he *is* a beginning, man can begin; to be human and to be free are one and the same' (Arendt 2006f: 166). Our ability to be free is ingrained in our capacity as human beings to make an intervention and begin something new.

What renders such new beginnings so radical is that they seem to emerge out of nothing. Political action typically establishes a break with the status quo. It – quite literally – 'takes place' as an exceptional or extraordinary moment and creates the conditions in which something radically new can appear. A new beginning must carry its own source of legitimisation and offer its own foundation (Pitkin 1998: 281) and thus has 'nothing whatsoever to hold on to'

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outside of itself (Arendt 2006a: 198). In short, there arguably is something extraordinary or even miraculous about political action (Arendt 2005a: 114; Arendt 2006f: 168; Marchart 2005: 68; Virno 1996: 208–9). Political action is meaningful: not in light of its eventual outcomes, but precisely because it entails a seemingly miraculous break with the present – and, for those immediately involved in it, a direct experience of freedom.

This also explains Arendt's fascination with the history of revolutions and the moment of political founding or constitution that they entail. She is keen to stress that the Latin concept *principium*, from which our term 'principle' is derived, also translates as 'beginning' (2006a: 205). What is more, the ancient Greek *archê* (ἀρχή) does not coincidentally bear exactly the same double connotation. The political act of foundation thus establishes two related things: it begins something new, and it gives expression to a set of principles or 'criteria according to which all public actions are judged and which articulate the whole of political life' (Arendt 2018a: 53). It is constitutive both of the public space that action requires to emerge *and* of the very principles that are enacted in it (Arendt 2006f: 151). Ultimately, its source of legitimacy lies in the constitutive moment itself (Arendt 2006a: 205; Habermas 1996: 453; Kalyvas 2008: 242). The very etymology of 'constitution' illustrates that this is inevitably a collective – and by no means an individual – practice: it involves 'a plurality of actors coming together to *co-institute*, to establish jointly' (Kalyvas 2018: 105).

Arendt claims that only in such collective and constitutive moments of foundation is one free to experiment with new procedures of decision-making, new forms of organisation, new divisions of responsibility and distributions of power. This is also why, in her controversial comparison between the French Revolution and the American Revolution, Arendt favours the latter. Unlike the French revolutionaries, who primarily sought to liberate the people from poverty, misery or toil, their American counterparts sought to establish a new political space in which the enactment of freedom and making a beginning would always remain a possibility (2006a: 133). True equality, she states, is not so much related to justice but rather inheres in the ability of citizens to co-constitute and freely act and speak within a political space as each other's equals – what the ancient Greeks referred to as *isonomia* (ἰσονομία, see Arendt 2005a: 118). It is precisely this distinctive open-endedness, the intrinsic experience of freedom, and the ability to act as equals

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that together characterise Arendt's understanding of foundation as a political act par excellence.

## Beyond the Means–Ends Distinction: An Arendtian Reading of Prefiguration

How can the means and ends of prefigurative democracy be understood to be related if there are no 'markers of certainty' to give us direction along the way? Arendt's political thought has only rarely been referenced in the literature on prefigurative politics (Disch 1997). However, her conception of political action may help us to see this means–ends relation in a different light. Rather than a full consistency between means and ends, or a 'rehearsal' of the eventual ends, or a means that serves to a plurality of different *teloi*, prefigurative democracy can also be understood to challenge the very category of means and ends. This allows us to develop an anti-instrumentalist understanding of prefigurative democracy that meets the three criteria set out in the discussion above. First, prefiguration is radically open-ended and has an experimental character; second, it entails a meaningful experience to those immediately engaged in it (which means that its value or significance cannot be reduced to its eventual outcomes); and third, it is a distinctively political and collective practice. I will address the first two of these aspects below and return to the third point in the final section of this chapter.

To start with, let us see how Arendt's distinction between 'labour', 'work' and 'action' may inform a more open-ended conception of prefiguration. It is important to recall that we should not read this conceptual distinction as a strict division between mutually exclusive categories, each 'belonging' to their own realm or territory. It is also not quite Arendt's point that one activity should be prioritised over the other, or that they are not all part of what it means to be human (Topolski 2015: 57). However, she does argue that confusing these various forms of human activity may have undesirable consequences. Most important, in this context, is the often-made confusion between work (which is typically underpinned by an instrumentalist logic) and action. It easily feeds into the idea that, in politics, the ends justify the means – that 'in order to break an omelette, one has to break a few eggs'. As we have seen, this is precisely the rationale that many advocates and practitioners of a prefigurative politics seek to challenge. They typically insist on

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maintaining consistency between means and ends. As discussed above, however, this would imply that the ends of a prefigurative practice are already known in advance. It is debatable whether this is desirable or even possible in a radical-democratic politics, where the purposes of political process are constantly subject to scrutiny and rearticulation. Our engagement with Arendt arguably leads to a radically different understanding of the means–ends relation in politics. Political actors may often not have any predefined end at all. It thus follows that the real meaning of a political deed, what renders it intrinsically meaningful to those involved, is not determined by its eventual or projected outcomes. Rather than to argue for a perfect consistency between the means and ends of political practice, one could also see prefiguration as a critique or dismissal of this very instrumentalist category (or, at least, when it is applied to politics). Along the lines of Arendt's conception, we may reimagine prefigurative democracy as a beginning *without* ends.

Such a non-instrumentalist and radically open-ended conception of political action also resonates with how prefigurative politics is often perceived in practice. It is implied, for instance, in a famous slogan of the Mexican Zapatista movement: 'preguntando caminamos' ('we walk while asking') or 'caminar preguntando' ('asking while walking'). For the Zapatistas, arguably one of the most long-standing and influential prefigurative social movements of the past decades (Stahler-Sholk 2019), a lack of certainty about the possible outcomes of a process by no means detracts from its meaning or relevance. Quite the opposite: its end or purpose must deliberately and repeatedly be at stake along the way (Sitrin and Azzellini 2014: 38–9). According to John Holloway, who is actively involved in the Zapatista movement, their famous slogan underlines how prefigurative politics 'must be understood as both explanatory and open' (2010b: 44). It is not hard to recognise a similar open-endedness in the practice of many occupy movements such as OWS or the 15-M movement (Douzinas 2013: 163–4). Their squares and activist tent camps were 'laboratories of democracy in which shared understandings of democracy [could] develop: what "good" or "real" democracy might look like, and what is required for it to work' (Flesher Fominaya 2020: 13). In other words, these movements sought to make a new beginning, without having a clear idea of where and when this would end. This may also explain their reluctance to formulate any short-term demands (Bray 2013: 103–4). What was at stake in many of these movements' prefigurative practices was not to

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find an immediate solution, or to always act consistently with their projected ends or objectives. The real issue, rather, was to figure out in what direction their politics should take them. As Verónica Gago, speaking from the perspective of feminist assembly movements in Latin America, puts it: 'when we don't know what to do, we call an assembly' (2020: 164–5).

This brings us to a second important feature of prefigurative democracy: its experiential character. Applying Arendt's critique of the means–end distinction to the prefigurative politics of such social movements urges us to rethink the temporality between the present and the future. Political action does more than interrupt the status quo. It can also break with our chronological experience of time itself. In modern times, we are used to thinking of time as a gradual process: it is perceived as the measurable distance between two moments on a linear scale. But this is not the only possible conception of time. It may also be thought of as a moment or instance that cuts across this chronology – a conception of time that the ancient Greeks referred to as *kairos*. What is distinctive about this *kairotic* conception is that it allows us to understand chronologically remote moments as being 'simultaneous-along-time' (Anderson 2006: 24). Walter Benjamin referred to this conception of time in his 'Theses on History', whose first English edition was posthumously published by Arendt. Benjamin uses the term *Jetztzeit* (literally: 'now-time') to describe this sense of proximity between different historical events (Löwy 2016: 88–9). Revolutions, for instance, are typically experienced by their participants as the incarnations of previous historical events. They 'make the continuum of history explode' (Benjamin 1968b: 261). Rather than pursue a future end, one seeks to hold on to such an extraordinary moment as long as possible. Benjamin narrates how, in the July Revolution of 1830, the Parisian revolutionaries even fired at the city's tower clocks in an attempt to make them stop running (Benjamin 1968b: 261–2).

One may of course object that such a – seemingly anachronistic – conception of time has little resonance with the experiences of social movements today. Yet, this critique of chronology implicitly re-emerges in contemporary forms and definitions of prefiguration. In Marianne Maeckelbergh's formulation, 'practising prefiguration means removing the temporal distinction between the struggle in the *present* toward a goal in the future; instead, the struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal, become one in the present' (2009: 66–7).

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A similar idea was conveyed by the faux street sign of Tahrir Square, to which I referred in the Introduction. It is as if, by putting this up in the heart of London's financial district, one tried to give expression to a sense that 'Tahrir Square is here too'. Much like Benjamin's revolutionary Parisians, the participants of Occupy LSX sought to break through 'the continuum of history'. This non-chronological conception of time also seems to resonate with the experiences of recent indigenous movements that have engaged in prefigurative experimentation (Coulthard 2014: 159). These movements often took inspiration not from an ideal-image of the future but from the experiences of their ancestors in the past. As Nick Estes, a citizen of the Lower Brule Sioux tribe, argues:

> Indigenous notions of time consider the present to be structured entirely by our past and our ancestors. There is no separation between past and present, meaning that an alternative future is also determined by our understanding of our past. (Estes 2019: 14)

One example is the indigenous #NoDAPL movement of 2016. In an attempt to stop the construction of an oil pipeline near the Standing Rock reservation in the United States, and to protect its water sources and sacred burial grounds, this indigenous movement erected several tent camps in the reservation. Estes argues that 'the spirit of #NoDAPL, enacted daily in camp life, embodied a brief version of what Native life could be' (Estes 2019: 57).

This *kairotic* conception of time, which underpins the conception of prefigurative democracy that I seek to advance here, has a number of significant implications when we apply it to contemporary social movement politics. First, it follows that the meaning of such practices cannot be determined by its specific outcomes. Whatever happens next in no way detracts from the value of this experience. Second, as we have seen, in the experience of those engaged in political action, the future may not be as distant as is often assumed from an external point of view. Finally, the *kairotic* conception of time implies that there is an inherent tendency in political action to *oppose* its own point of conclusion. The very last thing that political actors want is to see their practices coming to a close. One rather tries to hold on to it and to prolong or expand the experimentation, continuous evaluation, conflict – and, above all: the experience of freedom – that it entails. As Davina Cooper (2014: 223) argues, '[a]s experiments in living that necessarily involve prefigurative

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practice . . . everyday utopias assert the importance of maintaining and sustaining what *is*'.

Again, this last feature – the urge of its participants to extend the political moment as long as possible – can easily be recognised in the practices of recent prefigurative movements. David Graeber and his fellow OWS founders saw the occupation of Zuccotti Park as 'a stepping-stone toward the creation of a whole network of such assemblies' (Graeber 2013: 43). In Turkey and Spain, networks of local neighbourhood assemblies emerged in the wake of the Gezi Park and 15-M movement (Roos 2013; Sanchéz 2012). It must be stressed that the question why or how a prefigurative practice can be extended is often itself a matter of debate. In the aftermath of some recent prefigurative movements, there were several, and at times competing, attempts to prolong or revive the experiment after its momentum had passed (Flesher Fominaya 2020: 146–7). Of course, this urge to hold on to the political moment also gives rise to new questions and dilemmas. How could one give a more durable form to such prefigurative moments, whilst retaining its distinctive open-ended, experimental and experiential character? And what sort of organisational or institutional form may be required to establish this? I return to these questions in the next chapter.

Let me first address another possible objection to the Arendtian conception of prefigurative democracy advanced here. If prefiguration must indeed be imagined as a beginning without ends – then what is still being prefigured? Does Arendt not condemn us to a rather sterile or empty idea of politics, in which one merely acts for the sake of acting? Is there still a future left for us to pursue? However, it must be stressed that just because action has no predefined ends, it does not necessarily follow that it cannot be inspired or driven by certain hopes, ideals and aspirations for the future. Alongside the difference between the meaning (*Sinn*) and ends (*Zwecke*), Arendt also introduces another relevant conceptual distinction in her unpublished 'Introduction into Politics': namely, that between ends (*Zwecke*) and goals (*Ziele*). The latter may be defined as the 'guidelines and directives by which we orient ourselves and which, as such, are never cast in stone, but whose concrete realizations are constantly changing' (Arendt 2005a: 193). A goal is 'not contained within the action itself, but, unlike ends, neither does it lie in the future. If it is achievable at all, it must remain constantly present, and precisely during times when it is *not yet* achieved' (Arendt 2005a: 198). Thus, unlike Giorgio Agamben, who has developed

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a 'gestural' conception of politics as 'means without ends', Arendt maintains that action can be inspired by an ideal or aspiration that is not yet fully attainable in the present. It would be a mistake to assume that in political action 'nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported' (Agamben 2000: 57). Seen from Arendt's perspective, political action inevitably does project beyond itself – or, indeed, prefigures an unattained goal, which is simultaneously 'not not' and 'not yet' realised (Swain 2019: 58). Her distinction between 'ends' (*Zwecke*), 'meaning' (*Sinn*) and 'goals' (*Ziele*) may help us to understand how prefigurative democracy can be both radically open-ended in the sense that it strives towards an uncertain and unrefined goal; and at the same time methodical in that one must continuously seek to overcome problems and obstacles in the pursuit of this horizon (Dietz 1994: 880–2). As Oliver Marchart argues in a similar vein, '[p]refigurative activists never move in straight lines toward a clearly defined goal; they move in staggering, tottering ways on noncircular lines toward an obfuscated goal' (Marchart 2019: 188).

Such a radically open-ended and anti-instrumentalist conception of prefigurative democracy also corresponds with its distinctive experiential features: precisely because a prefigurative politics does not strive towards a future end that is external to itself, those involved in it will typically seek to hold on to this moment of experimentation as long as possible. One may add to this that prefiguration entails a radically different sense of time, as present and future – or the means and the goals of political action – are experienced to coincide in the moment itself. But does Arendt's theoretical framework also meet the last criterion set at the beginning of this section? Her concept of action may be distinctively open-ended and receptive to the experiential aspect of political action, but is it also sufficiently political? Let me address this last question in the next section.

## Prefiguration as Politicisation

If political action does not necessarily serve to meet certain predefined ends – and if, moreover, political action typically takes place in a public realm that must be distinguished from our social and private environment – then what exact issues or topics can still be addressed in politics? What can politics possibly be about, if not the solution of societal issues or the implementation of an economic agenda (Arendt 2018b: 454–8)? It has been argued that Arendt's

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idea of the political is 'devoid of determinate social content' (McNay 2014: 38) and that she promotes an 'exceptionalist' idea of politics (Apter 2018). True political action, then, would only occur in the rare event of a Grand Historical Moment. And even in these rare cases, Arendt's notion of politics and the public sphere would categorically exclude everyone with a (re)productive function in society, as their concerns or grievances would be deemed insufficiently political or not worthy of public scrutiny (Bargu 2013; Wolin 2016: 240–1). It is understandable how Arendt's thought – and specifically her distinctions between 'work', 'labour' and 'action'; between the 'social' and the 'political'; or between the French and the American Revolution – gives rise to such interpretations. But I nevertheless contend that her conception of political action may be read and employed in a less rigid fashion. Rather than one side of a categorical distinction between different 'realms' or 'forms of doing', it may also be understood precisely as a transgression of such boundaries.

For a start, although there may be something 'exceptional' about political action, this does not quite mean that it should only rarely occur. Political action is exceptional in the sense that it establishes a break or interruption, after which nothing will ever be the same again. For those involved – either in an immediate sense, as participants, or indirectly as audience or bystanders – it entails a new beginning. But such a break could arguably occur anywhere and at any time. As an intervention, it transgresses the distinction between what is deemed 'properly' political, and that which is excluded from the political sphere or debate. Rather than a rigid categorical distinction, the boundary between the political on the one hand and the social or the private on the other is then understood as a 'line drawn in the sand . . . calling out agonistically to be contested, augmented, and amended' (Honig 1995: 146). In that case, as Richard Bernstein (1986: 122) puts it, 'the question whether a problem is itself properly social . . . or political is itself frequently the central political issue'. Politics thus entails the reframing and reclaiming of particular issues as sufficiently political. And it is precisely this reframing and reclaiming that establishes an intervention in the status quo. 'Political action' could then be read as a process of *politicisation*, or the rearticulation of conventional distinctions between 'the public' and 'the private', 'the political' and 'the social', and so on (Gündoğdu 2015: 56–7). As Andrew Schaap puts it, Arendt is 'primarily preoccupied not by the challenge of emancipation but civility – that is, how the public realm can be constituted in order to

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arrest those social processes that lead to people being made superfluous' (Schaap 2021: 42). Such acts of politicisation may evidently occur on the grand stage of History, but they may equally well happen in a more mundane or everyday context.

Seeing the politics of contemporary prefigurative movements through an Arendtian lens, this concept of 'politicisation' is particularly fruitful. Evidently, the experiments that took place on Tahrir Square, Zuccotti Park, Puerta del Sol and many similar places did not merely pertain to democratic decision-making and the organisation of public assemblies. There was also an important practical side to everyday life in the occupied square. Within these spaces, food was being prepared and distributed (Gordinier 2011); laundry was done and toilets were being cleaned (Gessen 2011); internet cafés and stages with amplification for debates and musical performances were set up (Khalil 2011: 247); teach-ins, workshops and lectures were organised (Pickerill and Krinsky 2012); and well-being or mental health work groups endeavoured to create a socially safe and inclusive environment (Howard and Pratt-Boyden 2013). These mundane or everyday activities did not merely form the infrastructure to support another prefigurative experiment with General Assemblies and consensus-oriented decision-making. Instead, they were part and parcel of the prefigurative experiment itself. As Cristina Flesher Fominaya (2020: 138) argues, the most important politicisation that these movements established 'resulted not from Habermasian exchanges of rational arguments extolling the virtues or challenges of democracy in the general assemblies . . . but rather from the shared experience of resolving the *practical* organization of life in common'.

Indeed, Judith Butler argues that there was something 'Arendtian and counter-Arendtian' about these everyday practices within the occupied square. On the one hand, by occupying and reorganising public space these protesters gave expression to their grievances and demands. On the other hand, their public statement largely pertained to 'maintaining themselves as persisting bodies with needs, desires, and requirements' (Butler 2015: 97). Even the most mundane or everyday activity suddenly acquired political meaning. By sleeping, eating, cooking and studying on the streets, Butler holds, these protesters transgressed the boundaries between the private and the public – thus politicising both (Butler 2015: 71). If it is true, as Arendt herself states, that 'whatever occurs in this space of appearance is political by definition, even when it is not a direct product of

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action', then arguably cooking and sleeping in Gezi Park or Tahrir Square became the most political thing to do (Arendt 2006f: 153; see also Lorey 2015: 77).

Approaching prefiguration as a process of politicisation also offers us a better understanding of why it is a distinctively political concept (and not primarily an ethical one, as some contemporary post-anarchists seem to hold). The point of prefigurative democracy is not so much to 'be the change you want to see' at an individual level, or to live a virtuous life behind closed doors. It is undeniably admirable if one manages to live in accordance with one's social and political ideals (although the ability to do so consistently may evince some measure of privilege). But there is also an important difference between moral consistency at a personal level and the need to collectively experience freedom in practice. As second generation feminists have rightly pointed out, 'the personal' can be political. Romantic and sexual relationships, gendered divisions of labour, personal safety and domestic violence all have important political implications. However, in order for them to be sufficiently politicised, they first need to be made 'public' in one sense or another. (This is not quite the same as saying that they need to be visible for everyone, but rather that they must somehow be addressed in a collective practice shared with others.) For social movements, experimenting with new forms of organisation, decision-making, cohabitation, planning, production and distribution and so forth may be a viable way of politicising such issues. This is precisely what we have seen in the everyday practices of the occupy movements of the past decade. What renders the establishment of a field kitchen or the distribution of clothing equally political as the organisation of a General Assembly is the fact that these experiments are part of collective practices, which both challenge and reshape the political and organisational form of society.

## Epilogue (By No Means a Conclusion)

I commenced this chapter with the question how prefigurative democracy may be imagined in a time when all markers of certainty have disappeared. Originally, in anarchist theory and practice, prefiguration was often perceived as an attempt to act in full consistency with one's ends. But it may not be quite evident how to do this, if the very content of these ends is unknown – or, to be more precise, when this is continuously debated and rearticulated within one's political

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practice itself. Not only is a prefigurative politics radically open-ended, as the practices of recent social movements suggest, but it also has strongly experiential and collective features. An Arendtian conception of political action may help us to reimagine the relation between means and ends in a prefigurative politics. What really is at stake here is not the ability to act consistently with one's ends, but rather the attempt to make a new beginning *without* ends. This explains why square occupation movements such as 15-M, OWS or Nuit Debout often lacked a clear agenda, and why they sought to prolong or expand their practices as long as possible. What is prefigured does not merely lie in a distant future: instead, it is realised and experienced in the political moment itself.

It could be objected that such an 'end-effacing' (Swain 2019) reading of prefiguration essentially deprives it of its revolutionary potential. After all, if one acts without a clear end in sight, then how is it at all possible to establish durable and systemic change in the long run? The point, of course, is not to argue that prefigurative democracy cannot have significant impact or outcomes. But if radical change is established in the here and now, rather than the future, this implies a different understanding of 'change' itself. As stated above, one of the main concerns of those engaged in a prefigurative practice is to hold on to the moment of beginning. In their experience, 'change' is not gradually established or measured by a chronological standard but continuously prolonged and expanded over time and space. This also means that, in order to last, prefigurative democracy must eventually acquire a durable institutional form. In the next chapter, I therefore turn to the question of what kind of political institution or governmental form could accommodate it in the long term.

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